

Shopping for Soldiers

By Linda D. Kozaryn

UNCLE Sam needs young people, and he's moving to the mall to find them.

The armed forces are stepping into the 21st century with a new approach — high-tech recruiting stations in shopping malls. The military opened its flagship station at Potomac Mills in Woodbridge, Va., one of the largest and busiest shopping centers in the Washington, D.C., area.

The facility features computer kiosks and flat-screen video displays. With its state-of-the-art technology, the station takes recruiting centers into the new century in a great location, said Carolyn Becraft, assistant secretary of the Navy for Manpower and Reserve Affairs.

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The Potomac Mills Recruiting Station represents a new, exciting way for the military to interact with the public, said Bernard Rostker, defense undersecretary for personnel and readiness.

"If this works out, it's just the beginning," he said. "We have 30 other locations that would meet the same criteria. We're not going to go into them, however, until we know whether this is cost-effective."

Anyone who's shopped at Potomac Mills will understand why Uncle Sam wants in: "I was here one Saturday," Rostker said, "and it struck me that this mall was wall-to-wall people, many of them teenagers."

So when Rostker was undersecretary of the Army a while back, he asked, "Why aren't we in

places like Potomac Mills?"

The response he got was that there already was a recruiting station in the area. It was across the street in a lower-rent strip mall.

"The rent was cheap for a reason," Rostker pointed out. "That's not where people go."

The Potomac Mills station isn't cheap, Rostker said, but added that the military needs to try different approaches to meet the recruiting challenge.

"It's all too easy to throw more recruiters and advertising dollars at the problem, but that's very expensive," he said. "The cost of the whole center here is less than a 30-second TV spot during a championship basketball game."

Putting recruiters in the nation's mega-malls just may be the way to go, Rostker said. There, military "sales" specialists can tell both parents and potential recruits about the skill training, travel and educational benefits available.

The initial numbers seem to show the move is paying off. The Army recruiting office had 34 leads during its first month of operation, said station manager SFC Trent Riley.

Recruiters can also highlight the military's intangible benefits — discipline, esprit de corps, duty, honor and patriotism. Recruiters say many young people, like Temeika Kaminsky, one of the Army's newest privates, proudly join to serve their country.

Kaminsky, 20, of Alexandria, Va., is married and has a one-year-old daughter.

After her 1998 high school graduation, she worked in the e-trade banking industry. During the opening ceremony at Potomac Mills, she enlisted for four years as a signal systems support specialist, but said she plans on doing 20 years, if not more.

"The military has been part of my life since I was very little," Kaminsky said. "I love the idea of serving my country for a greater purpose."

Kaminsky linked up with the military at a station located in a strip mall. The new high-tech station in the mall, she said, is a better spot to attract people.

"Everybody walks through the mall — the young, the old, newcomers to the country. They're going to see this, and it looks very professional. It stands out," she said. □



SFC Trent Riley, Army recruiting station manager at Potomac Mills Mall, says that 34 potential recruits resulted from visits to the facility during its first month of operation.

SSG John Valceanu